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RURAL COMMUNITY NETWORK (NI) MAGAZINE



inside



*Spotlight on the Rural Community
Estates Programme*

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"The Rural Community Network (RCN) is a voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality".

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the winter edition of Network News.

This particular edition of Network News focuses on RCN's Rural Community Estates Programme (RCEP) which was launched in 2003 and recently reached its full complement of Local Project Officers in 13 council areas across rural Northern Ireland.

The work of the RCEP takes place in community estates which have a history of high levels of disadvantage and low levels of community infrastructure.

This particular edition uses the experiences of 13 community development workers within the Rural Community Estates Programme to help illustrate first hand both the challenges and opportunities that exist when tackling rural poverty in community estates.

When tackling poverty considerable time needs to be invested in developing relationships not only with statutory agencies but also and most importantly, the residents of the local estates. For many this has been a new experience - being asked for their opinion and having that opinion valued as making a contribution to a way forward for the community.

This edition with its grounded focus and style should help illustrate the nature of life in rural community estates and the important work of the RCEP. You will learn about the contributions which have been made in addressing areas of inclusion, community infrastructure, internal/external networking, engaging with the statutory sector and improving quality of life. You will hear about projects such as community clean ups, environmental improvements, networking events, all identified by the communities themselves as issues which impact upon their lives in rural housing estates and need addressed.

The diversity of the work and approaches detailed help to demonstrate that there is not just one solution to any challenge. Moreover it helps to confirm that one should: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has!"

Enjoy your read

WHAT GIVES IN THERE?

When driving round the roads in my previous post as Project Assessment Officer in RCN, I was struck by the diverse nature of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates littered across rural Northern Ireland. Some estates were sited within towns and villages whilst some were 'out in the sticks'. It was these isolated estates which really intrigued me. 'Who thought of putting an estate in such a lonely place?', 'Who lives in these estates?', 'What does this isolation mean to people living on the estates?' were just some of the questions I found myself asking. Life has a funny way of giving you opportunities to get some answers to questions and, just a few years later, I now find myself heading up the Rural Community Estates Programme (RCEP), which aims to work with people across a range of Housing Executive estates with the ultimate objective of improving the quality of life within the estates using community development as the guiding principles of this work.

To make these improvements the Programme has identified six main aims, these being:

1. Promoting social inclusion;
2. Development of community infrastructure;
3. Increasing the level of community engagement within the housing estates;
4. Increasing the levels of external networking by the communities from the housing estates;
5. Increasing community confidence and level of co-operation with the statutory sector;
6. Improving the quality of life for people living in the housing estates.

The Programme is managed by a Partnership comprising of representatives from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the International Fund For Ireland (IFI), Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) and Rural Community Network. This Partnership offers strategic direction for the Programme as well as overseeing spend of the funders' finances.

The Programme on the ground revolves around the work of the 13 RCEP Local Project Officers working across 13 District Council areas and during the lifetime of the programme within approximately 70 housing estates clusters. To add value to this work on the ground, 13 local RCEP advisory groups have been established. These advisory groups contain representatives of the NIHE, Rural Support Networks and District Councils as the common key agencies across the Programme and are then supplemented by other local agencies as relevant to the area, including Local Strategic Partnerships, Health Action Zones (HAZ), Community Safety and Community Police. These advisory groups are a very important aspect to the Programme as they offer key local information on services as well as practical help and support not only to the Project Officer, but also and, more importantly, for the residents of the estates.

However the essential ingredient in the success of this Programme is, and will always be, the people living on the estates. From the range of consultations held, a plethora of local issues have been identified by local residents which are of concern to them and their families. Despite all the

problems that exist it is very refreshing to see that the majority of people actually enjoy living in the estate again for a wide variety of reasons. Our task within the Programme is to identify how the community acting as a collective can improve the lives of everyone. This betterment of quality of life can come about through self help actions or in collaboration with outside groups and agencies, but in developing these actions, it is the coming together of local people to create opportunities for a better community for all to live in which is the most important part of the process.

Already small community actions are beginning to make a difference to people's lives. The introduction of a rural transport scheme has reduced isolation for a number of pensioners, small environmental improvements have developed a sense of pride in place, young people are being engaged in ways not thought possible in estates and statutory bodies are now being held accountable for services which have a direct impact on people's lives.

This Programme has really just begun and so much work remains to be completed. What is left behind will be important and this depends on a large number of factors coming together. However, what the Programme can do is help the people living in rural community estates recognise that there is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Michael Hughes
RCEP Co-ordinator



Addressing Social Inclusion - Through Capacity Building

“We need, as community development practitioners, to operate a system that represents a hammock, strong with the ability to swing back and forth, a flexible supportive structure that wraps around the person.”

On the issue of social inclusion, early investigations in Magherafelt revealed a diverse range of issues in each of the identified rural housing estates. It highlighted that the symptoms of social exclusion were presenting in different forms in the different areas. What is common, however, is the impact social inclusion has on the quality of life of residents in these estates.

A common factor in improving quality of life is to proactively support residents to become involved in activities, which have a positive impact on their lives. Experience has shown and consultation revealed that residents are best placed to determine how best they could use their existing skills and build new skills to make a difference to the quality of their lives.

“It was very nice to come to a meeting where people listened to you and were very understanding”.

Social inclusion manifests itself in a diverse range of ways in the different estates as the example below illustrates.

In Kilross, for example, the estate was physically isolated from services and community activity in the local village. This was compounded by the fact that the majority of residents

were elderly with limited access to transport. Although isolation was a big disadvantage, further research with a door to door survey revealed that was the way some residents liked it! They enjoyed the privacy and the quiet. One of the most memorable comments being:

“I like it up here because no-one ever comes to my door to do silly surveys”!

If you consider social capital to be the fabric of infrastructure and to include bonding, bridging and linking, then in Glenelly it was clear, it had at least strong bonding social capital. However, it was evident that the level of community activity has been hampered by the lack of an organised local community group within the estate. Through the Programme, the residents have taken the first tentative steps towards addressing this deficit through organised community activity. This has included a day trip for children and a networking visit to a group with a similar interest. These small activities have demonstrated to residents how organised activity can make a difference.

“I really think now that we can change the estate if you see what they have done”.

Funding made available through the RCEP has enabled a group from the

Alexander Park in Upperlands to address issues of exclusion with young people. The development of a wall mural, as an artistic medium, has increased feelings of pride and sense of place both for younger people and the wider estate community. There is a strong residents group in the estate which wants to be more inclusive of young people.

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“Agencies only do something when something ‘bad’ happens...”

Proactively enabling and encouraging residents to become involved in activities, processes and partnerships can have a positive impact on the lives of those experiencing social exclusion in rural housing estates. Rather than being passive, the RCEP strives to support residents in becoming active participants in their community. The case studies below show how this process has been rolled out in the Banbridge area.

An initial consultation meeting with residents from Castlevue (Gilford) explored what they liked and disliked about living there. It asked what they felt could be enhanced within the estate and what role they could play in this process. A range of themes of varying degrees of importance emerged. A prioritisation exercise identified the following as the key concerns for residents:

- traffic calming;
- refurbishment of the community club;
- problem families within the estate;
- need for a children's play area;
- dog fouling;
- improve relationships with the Council, NIHE etc;
- tidy up the waste ground at the back of the Community Club; and
- do something about the underage drinking, noise pollution etc.

A core group of 12 residents decided to concentrate on addressing two or three of these issues. This core group has been fully involved in planning how to tackle these issues and in deciding who should be involved and what actions to take.

A Christmas event for the young and elderly residents from the estate and surrounding area has since been planned. This is a major milestone as it is the first time a socially inclusive event like this has been organised in the estate for residents of the estate.

Other snapshots of activities in Banbridge:

In Stramore, the Community Association is working with the RCEP Project Officer on ideas to try to increase the number of young people involved in community activities and to bring the older residents into positive contact with the younger generation. A group in Drumadonald is organising a 'Health Day' to try to bring all the agencies and organisations that provide information, support and services relating to health, in the widest sense, together. Also organised are outings for the young, elderly and those in between, plus courses such as First Aid, guitar and basic computer skills.

Loughbrickland & District Community Association has identified that it does not fully represent the diversity of the community that lives in the area. With the support of the RCEP, it is working to encourage the engagement of more people that live in the estates in the village in the events and activities which it organises. More importantly, it has ensured that these estate residents participate in the planning of these activities.

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AN AREA OF *OUTSTANDING BEAUTY*, A COMMUNITY OF *OUTSTANDING POTENTIAL*

Rostrevor is situated in the foothills of the Mourne Mountains, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It receives thousands of visitors yearly and pays host to a major music festival. It seems to be a village where life passes you by, troubles are few, a good place to live. However as a result of initial research conducted by the RCEP in the area, particular issues became apparent within one estate in the village-Carrickbawn Park.

Lying north of the village, Carrickbawn Park could not be in a more picturesque place with a backdrop of the Mourne Mountains. This idyllic setting masked a myriad of challenges that were not being addressed by the Rostrevor Community Association (RCA) or by the residents themselves. With the help of the RCA, contacts were made with a number of residents from the estate. With no organised group within the estate, it was important that engagement with residents was done in such a way as to gain their confidence with myself as a person and with what the Programme could offer to them.

One of the first lessons learned was that you do not need a community venue to get people together to commence community action in an area. Initial meetings were convened in people's houses and the very early discussions mulled over the frustration of residents in the challenges of getting a group going in the estate. These discussions were very valuable in getting out into the open the history of the estate and, from this, developing a course of action which, with the help of the Project Officer, could enhance the potential of a successful group getting off the ground.

What was remarkable in these early discussions was that, for the most part, residents felt that the estate was a good place to live in. The challenge was really how to get people working together to make the estate an even better place to reside. With this in

mind, a steering group was established to complete an initial community audit for the estate and to organise meetings which would seek the views of as many residents as possible, in particular the youth and elderly.

Feeding back the results of all these consultations allowed the community to prioritise a number of key issues including youth provision, play facility, environmental improvements, community facility and the formation of a residents' group. This last issue was very important in that it came from the people of the estate; it was not forced or progressed in an artificial manner. With community support, a new group was formed at the next meeting of the residents. The group has now adopted its own constitution and opened a bank account.

Since developing this formal community infrastructure, the group organised a community fun day which had some very valuable input from local businesses and the youth of the estate who raised the commendable sum of £300 as their contribution. Stronger and more positive links have now been formed with the Housing Executive and a programme of environmental improvements is being developed through a partnership approach. Education classes have commenced, a community newsletter has been published and there is an air of community confidence and pride in place throughout the estate.

But the group is not content to rest on these initial achievements. With Christmas on the horizon, many people both within and outside the group are beaver away organising a range of Christmas events which will bring residents closer together as a community. A second newsletter is planned and a more extensive community survey will be carried out allowing future plans for the estate to be developed. One question the group has asked themselves: 'is this work of any benefit?' Their answer came from within the estate, one resident had noted that "there had been no fighting on the estate since the project started." High praise indeed, praise that is justified and praise that can help the group and the community realise its potential in the coming years.

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SMALL ACTIONS HAVE CREATED POSITIVE CHANGE: DEVELOPING COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

In her contribution, Ann Ward, the RCEP Project Officer for Armagh, explains how the growth of local community action groups has offered development opportunities for residents living in the estates she is currently working with.

Clady is situated on the highest point of County Armagh. Situated four miles from Markethill, the hilly terrain adds to the sense of rural isolation felt by the residents of this area. When I first approached people in the area, it became clear that there was no history of collective community action and, as a result, the community was in many ways, powerless to influence change.

With the support of the Local Project Officer, a number of residents distributed a questionnaire in the area. When results were returned, questionnaires were analysed and a public meeting was organised to allow feedback to and comment from the local community. Even at these early stages, people in the Clady area were beginning to see the value of coming together to address issues which for so long had caused nuisance and indeed impacted on their own and the community's safety.

As a result of the public meeting, an informal community action group has been established. It has focused as a matter of urgency on community safety issues, particularly those relating to traffic speed and the improvement of road conditions through gritting. The group developed and circulated a petition, met as a collective with local councillors representing both communities and is now meeting with Road Service to discuss not only the immediate concerns, but also how further road improvements could improve the quality of life in the area. This developing community infrastructure, although an informal grouping, has given confidence to the community as they see the value of collective action and how it often carries more voice and legitimacy than that of an individual.

Such collective community action is also making a difference in the Hamiltonsbawn area which, over the

past number of years, has seen considerable housing development. This development has seen an increase in the local community in terms of numbers but this has not been matched by community infrastructure and complementary facilities to meet the needs of the residents of the area. Through the RCEP, just the simple fact of allowing people to express a view about their area has been welcome. One resident thanked the programme for the opportunity to be consulted commenting "I'm delighted that someone has taken some interest in the area at last".

Just like Clady, residents of Hamiltonsbawn are now meeting on a regular basis, examining the potential for change in the community through a process of working for and with each other. The very experience of talking with other members of the community about community issues and possible solutions has created a bond among residents that wasn't there before programme intervention.

In both examples, the groupings established are both informal community action groups in that they remain un-constituted. This informality has far from deterred residents from being concerned about the welfare of the community or in developing actions which can address their concerns. In addition what has been pleasing is the response of other statutory bodies, voluntary organisations and elected representatives. All have demonstrated

a willingness to engage in a meaningful way with group representatives. This engagement has further encouraged the groups to continue with the process of community development and regeneration.

One year into the Armagh RCEP, there is ample evidence that developing community infrastructure and promoting collective community action are bringing real benefits to local communities. Small actions have created positive change. The challenge is now to sustain this process, to consolidate what is there, whilst at the same time, creating opportunities for further engagement across all sectors of the community. I look forward to helping these communities and others within my programme to achieve their full potential as a community working together for the benefit of all.

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How do you get people off their backsides?

This is one of the frequently asked questions in community work and it is one of the aims of the Rural Community Estates Project, except that they don't quite say it like that. In fancy language it is known as 'increasing the level of community involvement'. Same thing really but different language.

I find that most people want to get involved but don't know how or have nothing to motivate them. Where this is happening consistently, we call it an 'area of low infrastructure' and we stick another label on them which only makes it more difficult for them to get involved.

Community work is about people as you find them, good, bad or indifferent and the trick is how to engage with them in a way that shows them that you are taking them seriously. There is an old adage in psychology that states that if you treat people like children, they will act like children, and if you treat them as adults, they will act like adults. Generally true in my experience and a good place to start with any given community, no matter what their circumstances.

The first contact is important. If you are to create that human bond, this will hopefully develop into a trust and acceptance that will engender self-confidence and belief.

Let me give you an example to illustrate from ordinary people. The village of Moorfields straddles the road from Ballymena to Larne and is like any other village we drive through, inconspicuous by its lack of activity. In talking to the people of the village over numerous cups of tea and biscuits ("we never before got as much value out of a packet of Hobnobs") it was evident that many of them were keen to do something but what? and how? Some of the backsides settled deeper into the chair but some backsides moved forward to the edge of the seat but did not just yet get off it, if you see what I mean. But I noticed that



there was a beginning of interest and that was enough. A gentle blow on the embers can bring the fire to life but a violent blow will scatter the ashes all over the house!

So I applied a gentle blow and encouraged those who were interested to come together just to see what might happen. And even I was surprised at what did happen.

After the initial questions of what do we do now, we extracted the beginnings of an idea to have a bit of fun in the village. Just that. Nothing pretentious or grand, just fun for a change. As the possibilities grew the level of enthusiasm grew and the bums edged closer to the edge and eventually we had lift off. Whoaaa! The ideas started to flow and there seemed like no end to the things that could be done. The committee organised and asked a lot of questions about where do we get money, and volunteers and what if nobody comes, and practical things like how many burgers will we get and what if it rains and will the old folks be put off with the noise. And so on it went. All good community stuff and all the time more bums were getting off their settees to help and what a day they had. Fun unlimited, great craic and that's not all.

A community was brought to life again and they made links with all sorts of people and agencies and they did it themselves. A local newspaper recently reported that the Moorfields Community Association scooped the top prize in Ballymena's best-kept bonfire competition and donated their winnings to the George Sloan Centre..... The interesting part is the end of the story. Moorfields had arrived!

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Shopping trips to and acting the clown the weekend

One of the most interesting elements of the Rural Community Estates Programme (RCEP) is the unknown potential that can be tapped by simply bringing people together. One of the aims of the RCEP is to create mechanisms that help to increase the level of community engagement in rural housing clusters. However once these mechanisms are provided the opportunity to take issues forward lies solely with the community and the nature of the related outcomes never ceases to surprise, enthuse, encourage, even in some cases dismay, but on the whole provides a varied spectrum of challenges for both the community and the RCEP worker to overcome.



Sprucefield

own at

In Saintfield, for example, initial meetings with residents focused on how the RCEP could assist in overcoming issues regarding youth provision, traffic calming and community safety but throughout there was always a sense of frustration that there was no vehicle in which to bring such issues further. This lack of a collective voice also made it more difficult for residents to highlight issues affecting their community and subsequently provide opportunities to engage with relevant statutory or community based organisations. Failed attempts to develop estate-based resident groups in the past only added to the increased sense of apathy within the estates over the years.

In November last year, a questionnaire was distributed to all residents in the area. This marked the first stage of community engagement by a small number of volunteers. Soon after the community was invited to a number of public consultations culminating in April with the formation of the Saintfield Community Estates Partnership.

Past experience had informed the group that the formation of a community association cannot resolve all 'problems' and that effort is still needed to make the group representative of the needs of the entire estate community as possible. To help raise its profile within the

area, the Group developed a quarterly community newsletter informing the community about their work and providing information on issues such as health and community safety. The Group also organised numerous social events. The most successful event so far has been a Summer Fun Day held on Saturday 21st August, complete with bouncy castle, clowns and a magician (who was so good he managed to make himself invisible all day!).

The Group was very successful in using this day as its flagship event as not only did they provide an opportunity for everybody, young and old to come together as a community, but they were also able to engage with residents on a one to one level. This provides a visible example of what could be achieved by community engagement at a very simple level. It has since emerged that the fun day has been the most effective method of encouraging new members to the group.

Like in all areas the RCEP programme in Co Down is still in its infancy but already residents have reaped the benefits by simply engaging together, staying together and working together to change problems into opportunities.

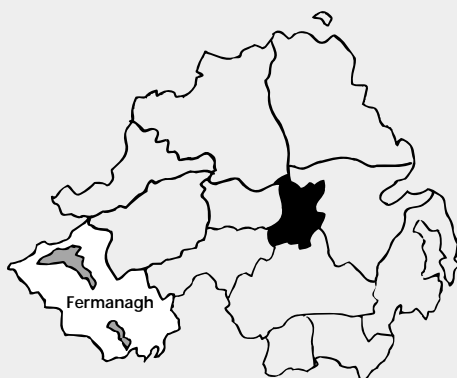
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What else is going on in Fermanagh?

In an era where the latest event can be broadcast live from the far reaches of our world, it is amazing that some of the slowest events to get noticed or even heard of are those within the parish boundary. Despite globalisation, we can retain a deep sense of insularity, an insularity which can diminish our experience of others' creativity and, as a result, puts limits on what we can do within our spaces and confines.



A very practical way of removing such insularity to deepen and broaden our experiences of life is through networking, whether this is on a formal or informal basis. As the Programme developed in County Fermanagh, a very conscious effort has been made to provide opportunities whereby people from the estates and areas engaged in the Programme can come together, explore common or unique issues, learn from others and, from this, expand the potential for future development both at individual estate and at county level.

To date, three networking events have been held in Fermanagh. These have been held in different venues with different themes giving each event a focus, maintaining structure but conducted with an emphasis on fun, enjoyment and learning. One of the challenges faced in organising these

events was the geographical spread of the groups involved in the Programme across the county and how this dispersal could limit the participation of residents. However, using the services of the local rural transport scheme, most participants were bused to the events and whilst en-route to the venue, the networking began.

A series of exercises were organised by a facilitator on the bus. This meant that even in the travelling, no time was being wasted in developing networking opportunities.

This proved really popular with participants given that many of them were new to the programme, new to community development and new to each other. As one participant commented "we got chatting on the bus with a representative from Garrison. It was really free and easy. We got talking about the issues in our areas and what we had in common like traffic problems". Another resident remarked "it was excellent getting the bus to pick us up. I was chatting to a woman from Kesh and I got different ideas from different clubs".

At the venues, exercises continued, all designed to keep the focus on the particular theme. Residents could firstly identify the theme with their own locality, listen to other areas sharing issues and work together to come up with some solutions to the issues raised. Exercises were simple, very practical and, in many cases, comical. Many of the residents who at first were very wary of the event threw themselves full heartedly into the exercises and it was amazing the amount of creativity among people when their imagination was activated.

One unexpected outcome of the networking programme has been the very visible empowerment of people in taking control of some key elements of the organisation of the events. These acts of empowerment taught everyone a very valuable lesson in that people choose to participate in so many different ways and this participation is a legitimate method of social inclusion and needs to be respected and acknowledged. The second of the networking events brought this lesson very starkly out into the open when some members of the host group took control of the catering. Whilst this limited their involvement at the event, their contribution to its success was very noticeable. One of the residents put her choice of inclusion in the event into perspective by stating "I was glad to be organising the food. My strength is working away in the background and I like to do my part." Despite her involvement with the

catering end, she did manage to get involved in the exercises and found them very useful. "It was just like having a chat. They wanted to sit down and talk and find out where I came from."

Having used three different venues, a college and two community venues, the signs from those involved are that they want more. Residents are now actually offering support and after the last event, a resident stated "you could use our hall for the next one. I'd be happy to help organise that."

With external networking now firmly established within the Fermanagh programme, future events will take their cue from the residents in terms of theme, location and format. Residents have seen the value of talking to people outside of their immediate area and have taken actions by themselves as a result. As one resident reported "It was great to meet Jason Donaghy (Fermanagh Trust). We've had him out since to speak to our club and he's coming to meet us again." External networking is proving a valuable component to the programme and residents now know more and will continue to know more about what else is going on in Fermanagh.

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The Rural Community

The genesis of the Rural Community Estates Programme was based on the identification of need by community workers over a considerable period of time during the 90s, of the particular needs in Rural Community estates of isolated rural housing estates and the often perceived lack of integration with the wider rural community. This theme was picked up in the late 90s in a pilot programme known as in the Coleraine Rural Housing Estates Programme. The evaluation of this Programme identified many successful features of the community work carried out in seven rural housing estates in the Coleraine District and recommended that this kind of programme should receive wider attention.

Within the Rural Development Programme 2001 – 2006, a number of the organisations that had been involved in the Coleraine project met to explore a more mainstream programme under the sectoral programme of DARD. In the first instance, DARD, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Community Foundation NI and RCN, later joined by IFI, worked through a two-year process to bring forward the current Rural Community Estates Programme. RCN chairs the partnership and manages the programme, the detail of which are explained within this edition. The partnership made applications to DARD BSP, NIHE, Executive Programme funds and International Fund for Ireland for nearly 3 million pounds for five years.

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI) has been a partner in the Programme since the outset. We have enjoyed being involved in both the development of the programme content, budget and application processes (agh!!! some painful memories too) and now, the best part of all - the implementation phase.

CFNI and RCN have a history of collaboration across a range of issues but our interest in the issue of the support and development of work in areas of weak community infrastructure (WCI) is particularly long-standing - right back to 1994/5.

Both organisations have engaged with demonstration projects, research and publications on the issue of WCI and continue to do so through a joint Policy Reference Group chaired by Dr. Jeremy Harbison. This Reference Group will take forward the policy and practice issues arising from the RCN work and the work of the CFNI Communities in Transition Programme. Both Programmes, therefore, have huge potential in terms of influencing future funding and policy direction on WCI.

A lot of the learning that influenced the content of the RCEP Programme came from the ongoing experience of both organisations and from the Coleraine Rural Housing Estates project which both organisations helped to develop and support in collaboration with others in the late 90s. Issues like the length of tenure of a support programme – for WCI, it needs to be a minimum of five/six years; the need for pro-activity in getting local people involved in capacity building and animation work; the need for risk-taking in terms of funding small projects in order to develop on a larger scale; the need for realistic expectations and most importantly, the need to be visible and accessible to the local communities in the target areas.

The RCEP Programme faces big challenges. The model of practice is new in that it has invested in inter-agency partnerships from the outset. Small areas have been clustered together and it will be interesting to see if this works as a method for delivery of community development outcomes. It is a very exciting time for the team of workers who are all now in place and I wish them well in their work. As a Partnership, our role is changing now and we must begin to look and learn from the lessons arising.

Monina O'Prey
Programme Manager
Community Foundation for NI

The RCEP was formed with the principle objective of developing and implementing a strategically important community development programme within rural housing estates, specifically in areas of weak/low community infrastructure.

The objective of the Programme is to allow residents of the selected rural housing estates to assess the needs of their communities and then consider appropriate and innovative ways of addressing those needs.

DARD's investment of £1.3m in a £2.9m programme demonstrates its continued commitment to achieving an improvement in social, cultural and economic well-being for people working and living in rural areas.

Vincent McKeivitt
DARD

Rural Community Estates Programme

Involving tenants and community associations in addressing housing issues and discussing and developing their local services is one of the Housing Executive's priorities. By being more involved, communities can be better informed, contribute to better decision-making, improve services and standards locally and develop their own skills and opportunities.

The need to support the development of community infrastructure has, therefore, been long acknowledged. As far back as the early 1990s, the Housing Executive has been working with the Northern Ireland Tenants Action Project and the Housing Community Network which represents tenants from across Northern Ireland. This Network has an integral role in the formation of housing policies and procedures and regularly provides feedback on the Housing Executive's services. Those services apply equally to rural and urban areas and when the Housing Executive developed its current rural policy, 'Places for People' in 1999-2000, it acknowledged that *"given the tenure structure and geographical spread of rural areas, its approach to those areas needed to be different than its urban counterpart"*.

There were a significant number of rural estates outside the cities and towns. Here, householders lived, often in polarised and isolated, locations with little evidence of community activity. Given that these were smaller, dispersed rural estates, they had not been the focus of past community infrastructure programmes and had often been on the periphery of community development activity. The Housing Executive, therefore, entered into the Rural Community Estates Programme (RCEP), acknowledging that it would be a difficult and, in many ways, a unique partnership process. It did so, however, in the knowledge that, if successful, the RCEP would help rural communities to develop the most suitable solutions to their needs, housing or otherwise, while at the same time facilitating closer links between the Housing Executive and those living in rural communities.

With the Programme, being officially launched last year, it is still early days, but already, links are being built between the RCEP workers, Housing Executive District Managers and other interested agencies. It is also notable that there is also evidence of new groups coming forward in some of the RCEP estates. It is hoped that they can join with and add to the already valuable work of local Housing Community Networks in developing local services and influencing broader housing policy.

There is of course still much work to be done but the Housing Executive will continue to assist in whatever way it can, so that those involved can highlight local needs and act upon them. In partnership with the Housing Executive and others, local people living in these rural communities can make a difference to the areas where they live.

Michael Conway
NIHE

For RCN, the RCEP Programme addressed the issues for which RCN was formed addressing poverty, disadvantage and equality. In many ways, the programme is the third kind of model suggested in the Task Force report 'Investing Together' - outcome focused, Partnership driven and community led. Already for RCN as an organisation, it has brought many of the realities of challenges of local community development into our planning process for the future. The focus of the partnership organisations over the coming years will be to learn from the work and translate some of the policy lessons into the mainstream.

Niall Fitzduff
RCN

Since 1986, the International Fund for Ireland has provided grant assistance totalling over £500m to support over 5,300 projects in Northern Ireland and the six Southern border counties. The primary purpose of these projects was to: -

- promote economic and social advance; and
- encourage contact, dialogue and reconciliation between nationalists and unionists throughout Ireland.

This scale of investment has only been possible through the essential and generous financial support provided by our donors - Australia, Canada, the European Union, New Zealand and the United States of America.

From its earliest days, the Fund engaged with local communities to help identify and develop proposals that would kick-start the social and economic regeneration of disadvantaged areas. That work remains a priority area for the Fund and spending on community-based programmes has reflected a steady increase over the years.

The Fund recognises that many small isolated communities, particularly in rural areas, need assistance to create sustainable community infrastructures, to develop skills and relationships and to address social exclusion and disadvantage. That is why the Fund was pleased to support the Rural Community Estates Programme.

This Programme represents an excellent example of a genuine partnership approach involving funders and local communities working together to target resources, increase community confidence, boost local pride and improve the social and economic well being of local people.

Sam Corbett
IFI

"LISTENING, LEARNING, TALKING."

Why network? What is networking anyway? Why should we get involved?

These are the questions, as a Rural Community Estates Project Officer, I get asked from residents in the rural housing estates and clusters in the Derry area.

The following case study is an example of how a small community group has, within the space of a year, developed its potential and is currently exploring new opportunities and experiences.

Coshquin is a small rural border community, consisting mainly of the Housing Executive estate of Benview and a small newly developed private housing estate. It is located just off the main L'Derry - Letterkenny road just outside the boundary of Derry city and lies approx 500 yards from the Donegal border. During the early 1970s there was a major bomb explosion at

the military checkpoint located at the entrance to the Benview estate, resulting in the loss of lives and severely traumatising the local community.

In 2003, a consultation was carried out by the Rural Community Estates Programme, which highlighted the isolation of Benview Estate and a high level of despondency among residents. Residents felt they were 'forgotten' by most agencies and funders. This feeling of isolation and being forgotten was highlighted during a 'walk about day', when some of the agencies had to ask for directions to Coshquin, despite its proximity to the city.

One of the techniques to reduce isolation is through the use of



ALERT COMMUNITY AREA

EGLINTON & DISTRICT
COMMUNITY FORUM



networking. In early 2004, a Networking Day was organised in association with Derry RCEP with a focus on community safety. Residents from Coshquin along with residents from Claudy, Adrmore and Eglinton were able to meet new people and learn from each other's experiences, a process facilitated by the Coshquin Oral History Group.

Following on from the success of this day, the Oral History group was keen to expand its learning. Given this, it arranged to meet up with a similar group from Drogheda. This initial trip was to experience the diversity of a group living in the Republic of Ireland and through this networking expand the group's own knowledge and confidence. As a result of this learning, the Oral History group hopes

to hold a public exhibition of the work of the group, to include a photographic display and story telling session.

Through the process of networking, other communities have become aware of the Group and have asked the Group to share its experiences. If we recall the initial focus of the initial networking event was community safety, this outcome demonstrates that when networking, a range of opportunities and new ways forward can emerge.

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The areas which the Rural Community Estates Programme (Derry) covers are: Coshquin, Drumahoe, Ardmore, Claudy, Eglinton and Maydown.

GATEWAY TO THE GLENS

A Closer Look at Carnlough



'The Glens' are often described as 'a place apart', a realm or kingdom with each of the nine glens having its own unique character. Geographic 'isolation' is often noted as a key to their independence, unique character, timelessness and sometimes resistance to change.

The Carnlough area, which the Noble Deprivation scores rank in the 10% most deprived in the access domain (typical of others along this section of the North Antrim coast), has had a development committee for many years. Despite significant success in promoting their communities, the committee has been unable, to date, to engage the residents of the rural estates at the heart of this development.

Despite this impact of 'glens rurality' on attitudes to community development, residents recognise the need to deal with statutory bodies and agencies in their development efforts.

Past experience has been 'patchy', sometimes negative and unlikely to have helped promote self-esteem.

The Rural Community Estates Programme seeks to increase community confidence and levels of co-operation with the statutory sector. We recognise that residents need to build confidence and capacity to do this and that attitudes to collaboration and statutory partners need to change. The process will be incremental and long-term, but progress can be made in the short term. Empowerment takes place through the relationship and capacity building where each interaction is designed to build self-confidence and self-esteem, co-operation and mutual respect. Achievements en route, however small, help to deliver better service to residents of the estates in the area.

We have taken an 'appreciative' approach to establishing the

programme, recognising that the seeds of change are implicit in the very first conversations we have. So these have involved questions and stories about the achievements of residents, the high points of living in their communities and the valuable things learned from their past. This builds self-confidence and self-esteem and avoids problem-centred consultation, which can spiral into frustration and anger. It also initiates a positive approach to any way forward. Conversations with residents are paralleled by dialogue with statutory bodies. Here, initial perceptions can be checked, shared and used as the building blocks of a tripartite relationship between the residents, the statutory body and myself.

Next we have brought the potential partners together to share perceptions, needs, concerns and expectations and to understand realities and limitations on all sides. An information day brought representatives of statutory



and other bodies into the community to showcase their services and listen to specific concerns of residents. This helped residents to 'meet the other side' and to break the pattern of isolation and lack of self-esteem. Wide advertising of the event and the large turnout of statutory bodies helped to show the community its own importance and how others were prepared to take time and listen to their concerns. Those who registered were easily followed-up and all estate residents who attended welcomed me into their homes in the following weeks to continue the conversation.

Relationship building continued with meetings between small groups of residents and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the statutory body considered by residents as most involved with their immediate 'issues'. This gave residents a chance to dialogue and negotiate with statutory representatives on their issues and to develop leadership, communication

and negotiation skills, as well as build respect and appreciation. We agreed some small-scale initiatives to build expertise, confidence and value for collaboration.

Residents have learned how they can achieve more by working together. They find that they can expect to be heard by statutory bodies and taken seriously if they identify their issues clearly, prioritise them and deal respectfully and appreciatively with each other. The meetings encouraged residents to organise more, prepare better and be willing to meet with other bodies.

The next stage is for clarification and prioritisation of issues to take place with a view to sharing these at a larger meeting of various statutory bodies.

As well as being about building community infrastructure, confidence, partnerships and relationships, this

work has helped me to work on the most difficult task – finding a gateway to the Glens and the Glens people.

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The areas in which the Rural Community Estates Programme (Larne & South Moyle) covers are: Carnlough, Glenarm, Cushendall, Cushendun, Waterfoot, Magheramorne



whocaresaboutus?

Communities struggling for recognition

What have Mullenakill (an area just on the Armagh side of the Blackwater river and off the M1 motorway) and Fivemiletown (the main town along the Dungannon to Enniskillen road) got in common? From the outside very little, but for residents within the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) estates, their geographical location on the periphery of two counties and on the edge of administration units (including Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council and the NIHE) has left them feeling isolated and with a sense of 'who actually cares about us'.

Many people living in the estates are long term residents and have a great feeling for their area and the neighbours with which they share the estates. Through the course of the research conducted by the Programme, a number of issues that concerned residents emerged included safety within the estates and the immediate environment, the physical appearance of the estates and the access to agencies that could assist them with developing solutions to these concerns. In terms of the latter issue, the peripheral location of the estates was seen as a contributing factor to the lack of contact and limited access.

As the residents began to explore the improvements they would like to see in their areas they also began to see opportunities to address one of the key aims of the Programme to increase confidence in, and the level of co-operation with, the statutory sector. During discussions with residents, it was evident that for many their experiences with the statutory sector were, for the most part, negative.

Both areas made lists of priority work that needed to be done which could make a difference to the quality of people's lives. Simple improvements included: the moving of a bus shelter, a clean up of graffiti, environmental improvements, the installation of communal seating and the involvement of young people. These issues have been around for some time in the estates, but what occurred as a result of the Programme brought a new experience to both residents and agencies relevant to the areas.

Instead of accepting their lot and the 'it's always been like this' syndrome, residents in the estates took an approach of inviting the relevant agencies out to view the problems first hand and engaged in a range of discussions with them to explore possible solutions. For a lot of residents just to see 'the men from the ministry' walking around the estates, talking to people, being interested in their views and wanting to help was a major achievement in itself. To get these people to agree to various schemes which with the support and involvement of the residents, would have a positive impact on people's lives was something that a few months before would have been unthinkable.

But why the change? Basically residents wanted to try something different. They knew there were people out there who could help but in some cases they didn't know who to turn to, how to approach them and what to say. Past experience of indifference had created a process of confrontation, this new process was one of communication, co-operation and caring. To meet with representatives of the NIHE, the local

Council and Roads Service in an atmosphere where assisting the community was the main focus of these statutory agencies was a very empowering event for residents. With contacts made and with the beginning of the development of these relationships, the residents became more confident in discussing not only the main priority areas of work identified, but also exploring a range of further issues which future work might address.

It would be true to say that it has not been all plain sailing and it has taken a lot of hard work by the residents and the commitment of the statutory agencies to turn the ideas into reality. Consultation at each stage of the process in some cases was slow but at each stage progress was made and, as a result, confidence in each other has grown. This two-way commitment has been an important factor in achieving the installation of summer seats and flowerbeds, the removal of graffiti and the engagement of residents on the local Housing Community Network. As one resident involved in the work remarked "we are delighted with the improvements and I hope relationships continue between ourselves and the organisations who have helped us."

These communities have now found people and agencies who care about them. Residents have discovered a process whereby they can air grievances and have them addressed in a spirit of co-operation. As this co-operative working continues and develops throughout the Dungannon area, Mullenakill and Fivemiletown will be there as examples of increased community confidence in the statutory sector. The struggle for recognition no

longer needs to be made in the dark, the periphery estates have lit the flame and shown the way. The challenge now is to keep the flame burning. Other estates, residents and statutory agencies have now a path for developing respectful and meaningful relationships that benefit all.

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The areas which the Rural Community Estates Programme (Dungannon) covers are: Mullenakill, Fivemiletown, Ackinduff, Castlecaulfield, Granville, Killen and Caledon.



One of the core aims of this programme is to improve the quality of life for people living in rural community housing estates. Part of the process is to break through that first barrier of apathy that exists whereby people feel excluded through lack of confidence, skills, experience or just poor expectations.

Improving the quality of life for people through community development

A first stage to improving the quality of life for residents in RCEP areas was to carry out community consultations, e.g. community surveys, public forums. By undertaking the community consultations we used a very simplistic methodology to discover what people felt was important by asking residents:

1. What is happening in their area?
2. What isn't happening that they want to happen?
3. Who is talking to whom and why or not as the case may be? and
4. How can a community development programme help?

This exercise brought forward the usual suspects from: litter dumping, dog fouling, traffic-calming to anti-social behaviour. However, what was surprising was the recognition by the people living in these clusters of the need to build community spirit!

To date in Ards a process with local residents explored the sense of community in these rural housing clusters enhancing opportunities for collective and personal engagement within and outside the estates. Despite challenges, it is possible to see an improvement in the quality of life for residents.

A 'Fun Day' in Ballygowan

One of the striking revelations in the Programme has been that despite people living in the estates for a number of years, not everybody knew the residents of these estates. This 'getting to know your neighbour' and building relationships is just one part of how this programme could contribute to the improvement of quality of life. The challenge was how the programme could open new opportunities to residents.

One example of supporting such opportunities was in Ballygowan where the local community group, with support from the RCEP Programme, ran a Fun Day. It was important for the group to establish if this was a success in terms of developing a community identity. The results of a follow up survey among the residents found that 81% of those that had attended enjoyed the day. When asked, what for them had been the best part of the Fun Day? Some had felt just being there and taking part in events, while others commented: "Meeting the people I had not seen for a time."; "It was a community get together."; and "My four year old daughter was very excited to be doing some different activities."

Such comments support the value of the RCEP's work and help see a direct correlation between improving the sense of community spirit in an area and the positive impact on the quality of life of residents in rural housing clusters. This Fun Day helped support the building a sense of value, self worth and confidence for people living in Ballygowan, which is helping to address the sense of disadvantage felt by individuals.

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The areas which the Rural Community Estates Programme (Newtownards) covers are: Ballydrain, Ballygowan, Ballywalter, Carrowdore, Cottown and Loughries.



WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LIVE THERE? WHAT'S GOOD? WHAT COULD BE BETTER?

When we look at what this programme could ultimately achieve, improving the 'quality of life' of the residents may initially appear as a pretty obvious objective. But the crux of this is to understand what each resident in each estate understands about their own quality of life. In all the initial work with the individuals and groupings that make up the estates we work within the answers to the questions 'what is it like to live here?', 'what's good, what could be better?' were most easily defined in three interconnected terms - socially, economically and environmentally. Answers and comments highlighted - good neighbours, a safe place for children to play, a welcome for new families, making the estate look pleasant and safe, and local jobs for the young people were all points made from a wide range of people.

One estate that represents how a few people working together can highlight how a bit of work, a fair bit of fun and a job well done, can start to make peoples' quality of life that bit better. The Maryville Estate in Greencastle is a pretty typical estate in that part of the world. It is a mixture of older established residents and a few new families. The estate has an old playground now in disrepair and small areas of green space, some of which are planted with thorny bushes. These planted areas function as a safe gathering spot for the children and youth, somewhere parents can look out on from their homes. Needless to say there is also the odd crisp packet and drinks can deposited in the bushes.

The residents felt that by improving this small area, less litter would accumulate and the children would enjoy using the space more. The NI Housing Executive was approached and initial plans and ideas set in motion. The Omagh District Council Environmental Education Officer was also contacted by the residents to get a litter clean up and picnic organised a few weeks before the planting.

The planting day was agreed, all residents were invited, together with the local newspaper and the "slightly too big" shovels pulled out from garden sheds. With the full support of Ivan Armstrong, the NIHE District Manager, the grounds team not only cleared the area, dug the necessary



holes, but also supplied the trees for planting, and the children and youth set to work planting the trees.

So has this improved the “quality of life” for the residents? Perhaps, most importantly, the residents have started to work together and are looking at other plans they would like to see happen. There are still a few things that need to be discussed and agreed, and some of the underlying issues still exist, but perhaps it is this working together, making small but steady changes to the social life of the estate and improvements to their surroundings, while developing a few useful skills along the way – planting a tree, making up invites, talking to the press, that can define quality of life. There is also the knowledge that they have established good links with organisations such as the Council and the NIHE who may not always be able to help directly but will support them in what they are trying to achieve.

Certainly the trees are still there and have enjoyed a summer budding and flowering while bringing a fresh look and a small but an important sense of pride to the estate.

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The areas in which the Rural Community Estates Programme (Omagh) cover are: Fintona, Dooish, Dromore, Drumquin, Greencastle and Carrickmore.

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*Quality of life is feeling happy and safe.
However so many external factors influence the
fate of one's existence. When you speak to
those living in rural housing estates, people
wanted positive changes - working collectively
is crucial to bringing about positive results.*
(Glenda Nethery-RCEP)

”

policy update

For the last 14 years, rural development in Northern Ireland has largely been dependent on EU Structural Funds support. From 2007 – 2013, considerable change will take place. It is envisaged that all rural development programmes will be grouped into a single instrument under the Second Pillar of CAP to support both on farm and wider rural development. From 1st January 2005, direct payments for production will cease. Farmers will receive a Single Farm Payment linked to compliance with the environment, farm safety and animal welfare legislation. The Second Pillar of CAP will be extended to support much of what happened under the Structural Funds such as payments for providing public goods, conserving the countryside and rural heritage, protecting the environment, supporting farm competitiveness and developing the rural economy. Measures will be added to support rural development in relation to food quality, animal welfare and to meet environmental standards. From 2007, rural development programmes will be supported under a new Single Rural Fund which is entirely separate from Structural Funds. Over time, this Single Rural Fund under Pillar 2 will grow by transfers from Pillar 1 under a system known as Modulation. It is claimed that this Single Rural Fund will simplify bureaucracy and allow a broader and more flexible approach to rural development.

The proposals are set out in the Rural Development Regulation 2007-2013, currently under consultation. The Regulation sets out 4 axis or themes. Axis 1 – Improving the Competitiveness of Farming and Forestry, Axis 2 – Environment and Land Management, Axis 3 – Wider Rural Development and Axis 4 – Leader Method. It is proposed that Axis 1 and 3 each receive a minimum of 15% of the funding while Axis 2 receives 25% and 7% of the funding supports a Leader Approach. In this scenario, RDC and RCN would fit within the agenda of Axis 3 under the heading of Wider Rural Development, but the wider implications of the restructuring of DARD to split policy and delivery could have wider implications for

these programmes. It is also likely that the Review of Public Administration, indicating that the number of Councils could be reduced from 26 to 7, will also have implications for the delivery of rural development. This begs a question of whether there will be transitional arrangements as the new institutional framework begins to take shape, not to mention the implications of a reinstated devolved Government.

On the wider policy front, PriceWaterhouseCoopers have just completed their study on rural policy for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The study confirms the needs for further Government intervention in rural areas based on structural change, decline in agriculture and manufacturing, asset management based on land use and environment and social capital and the continuing need to address disadvantage and equality. Having looked across Government the report sees the strategic direction of the Regional Development Strategy as setting the framework within which DARD could work with other Government Departments. The linkages with health, education, transport, planning, housing, neighbourhood renewal etc are established.

RCN still sees the importance of a Rural White Paper as the best option for taking forward this substantive

agenda. We also see the importance of integrating equality within the development of any new proposals rather than an 'add on' extra. The consultation on this review will take place in the New Year and should be a priority for rural communities.

The first Annual Report of Rural Proofing has recently been published. While often confused with a rural strategy or indeed a Rural White Paper seeing it for what it is – an awareness programme which has engaged different departments to think through what impact their policies are having on rural areas – is no bad thing and should be built on in the coming years.

After considerable time and effort the report of the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector 'Investing Together' has appeared. The Report affirms the voluntary and community sector in its contribution to civic life in Northern Ireland, its role in tackling disadvantage and addressing inequality, the importance of the independence of the sector as well as its campaigning role and delivery of public services. The Report highlights many of the important issues which have dogged the sector for some time – short term funding, over-bureaucratisation, particularly in the realm of audits, recognition of the role of community development, proposing a community investment fund rising to £25m per annum over

time, affirming the need for good governance, management and accountability but full cost recovery in the delivery of services. The new mindset will focus on outcome making a difference to people's lives through working together on up to 10-year planning periods.

Perhaps, for the first time, the infrastructure required to support communities to deal with change has been recognised, including funding approaches, skills and competencies, planning support networks and organisational standards. Proposals are to be welcomed and it is important that action is taken as soon as possible to implement the recommendations. Some caution is needed to ensure the fine words do not mark a tendency towards monopoly and centralisation and a lack of teeth to really free the sector to be the campaigning voice rather than an extension of government delivering services.

RCN has been critical in the past of the lack of rural analysis during the work of the Task Force but commends the outcome of the work as a useful framework to begin to tease out some of the more difficult issues. Being clear about DARD's lead role in supporting the networking infrastructure in rural areas would help greatly in taking the process forward.

Many other policy areas are under review at the present time and some will have significant implications for rural areas. The current review of the Noble Deprivation Index can and should address the need to identify rural poverty and deprivation where it exists. This can only happen if NISRA is asked to produce an appropriate Rural Deprivation Index. Proposals for water charges have been universally condemned on the basis that the policies have not been thought through and lack transparency. Most worrying of all combined with the Reform of Domestic Rating System and limited relief for those most disadvantaged could increase numbers in rural areas falling into greater poverty.

RCN has looked at other policy areas such as the Anti-Poverty Strategy to replace New-TSN. We await the imminent publication of a 'Response to a Shared Future' and we would hope that the new Single Equality Bill would include good relations. After the publication of our research on 'Ageing and Rural Poverty' we look forward to a strong rural dimension in the final outcome of the OFM/DFM Strategy 'Ageing in an Inclusive Society'. As for the consultation on the Big Lottery Northern Ireland has yet to have a say never mind a rural priority as a focus.

Niall Fitzduff
Director
Rural Community Network

RCN MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM

Contact Name: _____

Organisation Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Email: _____

Website: _____

Tel: _____ Fax: _____

Please tick appropriate box

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|------|
| Community group | <input type="checkbox"/> | £20 |
| NI wide voluntary organisation | <input type="checkbox"/> | £50 |
| District Councils & other statutory bodies | <input type="checkbox"/> | £200 |
| Individual | <input type="checkbox"/> | £20 |
| Business sector | <input type="checkbox"/> | £50 |
| Standing Order form required | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Enclosed Cheque | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Please Invoice | <input type="checkbox"/> | |

Please return to Rural Community Network, FREEPOST NAT 11495, Cookstown BT80 8BR

Strategic Aims:

- To articulate the voice of rural communities.
- To promote community development and networking in rural communities.
- To work towards social inclusion and peace building in rural communities.
- To support the building of sustainable rural communities.

RCN Vision Statement:

Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society.

RCN Mission Statement:

Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

